

Officers Held in Salvador Abductions

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SAN SALVADOR, April 24 — Salvadoran security forces are continuing an investigation into a kidnapping ring involving at least two senior army officers and several rightist political activists here who are accused of abducting affluent businessmen for million-dollar ransoms.

Those under investigation are leading members of a powerful clique of ultra-rightist businessmen, officers and political figures who once held a virtual monopoly on political and economic power in El Salvador. Some are suspected of having led death squads that in the past killed thousands of people suspected of being leftists.

One of those arrested is Rodolfo Isidro López Sibrián, who was accused of killing two American agrarian advisers and the head of the Salvadoran land reform institute here five years ago but was not convicted. Mr. López Sibrián's brother-in-law was also detained, but immediately committed suicide under suspicious circumstances. His father-in-law is also under arrest.

The arrests and detentions are being treated as a major political event in El Salvador, where army officers and powerful rightists have traditionally been above the law. A number of those detained, including Mr. López Sibrián, a former army lieutenant, are close associates of Roberto d'Aubuisson, the right-wing political leader.

A Test Case

Diplomats and political analysts say the investigation is a test case that will help define the now narrow limits of Salvadoran justice. They note that the Salvadoran Government and army high command have been unwilling to actively prosecute past cases of human rights abuses because too many senior army officers are implicated in them.

But the Government appears ready to act against the rightist kidnapping ring because it seems to have operated only for profit and to have committed the politically unacceptable act of seizing members of the conservative political elite. The army high command and conservative businessmen's associations are calling for full legal action in the case.

"These people are the Mafia and I hope they put them away forever," a well-known Salvadoran businessman who is an outspoken political conservative said. "If they can't get these guys, they can't get anybody."

But in a clear sign of the angry reaction among extreme rightists, their favored newspaper, *El Diario de Hoy*, published a front-page article attacking the American Ambassador for "intervening in the internal affairs of the country." An American Embassy spokesman said the embassy had provided technical assistance to the police in carrying out forensic tests on fibers and other evidence in the case.

According to police and army officials, the kidnapping ring extorted as much as \$4 million by seizing five leading businessmen over the last three years. The kidnappers pretended to be leftist guerrillas, the officials said.

20 Are Detained

The police detained 20 people in the case, several of whom have been released. Some of the kidnapping victims were held in a house owned by Mr. López Sibrián, according to police officials who showed reporters the site.

Testifying before a military judge last week, Mr. López Sibrián said he knew of the kidnappings, but was not directly involved. Two sources close to the case said Mr. López Sibrián had failed a lie detector test.

Mr. López Sibrián's father-in-law, Luis Orlando Llovera Balette, also testified that he had not carried out kidnappings but that he knew of them. Mr. Llovera said he had been threatened with death by three army officers who he contends were involved in the kidnappings.

One of the officers he mentioned is Col. Roberto Mauricio Staben, commander of the American-trained Arce army battalion. He has been a favorite of the Central Intelligence Agency and

American military advisers who have seen him as a successful combat commander.

The military judge presiding over the case, Col. René Melara Vaquero, said last week that Colonel Staben and

Maj. Jose Alfredo Jiménez were under detention and were being investigated for their possible roles in the kidnapping ring. Mr. Llovera named a third officer, Col. Joaquín Zacapa, but he appears to have fled the country.